FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT
November 18, 2001

WE GATHER TOGETHER
John M. Buchanan

Almighty God, ruler of all the peoples of the earth, forgive, we pray, our shortcomings as a nation; purify our hearts to see and love truth; give wisdom to our counselors and steadfastness to our people; and bring us at last to the fair city of peace, whose foundations are mercy, justice, and goodwill, and whose builder and maker you are; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Woodrow Wilson (1856-1924)

FOURTH
PRESBY
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CHURCH

A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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WE GATHER TOGETHER
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JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Psalm 65
Isaiah 12:1-6
Luke 17:11-19

Dear God, in this season of thanksgiving, in this remarkable year, we come to you, more than ever, with grateful hearts. We thank you for this new day, for this new week, for family and friends, for our church, and for this time together. As we worship, speak the word you have for us; strengthen us for the challenges of our lives, comfort us, and give us your peace: through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

It is one of my favorite Sundays of the year, this is, the Sunday before Thanksgiving with those wonderful hymns:

> "Come Ye, Thankful People, Come"
> "We Gather Together to Ask the Lord's Blessing"
> "Now Thank We All Our God," which Robert McAfee Brown, a distinguished Presbyterian theologian who died a few weeks ago, said is the best all-purpose hymn in the book, suitable for every occasion: baptisms, weddings, ordinations, funerals . . .

"Now thank we all our God . . . who from our mother's arms hath blessed us on our way."

As a child, my mother dragged me to ecumenical community Thanksgiving services—on Thanksgiving Eve—primarily because she loved the hymns, particularly "We Gather Together."

Around here this is the weekend we throw our Presbyterian caution to the wind—bring out our electric sheep, put up wreaths and garlands two full weeks before Advent, which is the ecclesiastical equivalent of political incorrectness. And then on Saturday evening, for the Michigan Avenue parade and lighting ceremony, we put our choirs on the steps of the church to sing Christmas music, watch the parade together, and greet important Christmas icons: Mickey and Minnie Mouse. This year's favorite, among our choir, was Goofy. And Santa and Mrs. Santa proceeded down Michigan Avenue in the back of a pick-up truck. It's wonderful.

Did you see the cover of *Time* magazine this week? It caught my eye as I walked through an airport last Monday morning. The traditional red border and a large bright picture of a pumpkin pie and standing in its center, the American flag. Thanksgiving 2001, it proclaimed. In a fine feature-length article, Nancy Gibbs proposes that this Thanksgiving will be like no other. As "We Gather Together," Ms. Gibbs writes, using the hymn title, a Dutch folk hymn celebrating independence from Spain, "we are aware, as if we were truly all one household, of the families

who will face an empty chair at the table, the little boys sitting up straighter this year, their father—or mother—now gone."

Some are worried, Ms. Gibbs observed, about psychic overload, that families will sit around this year sobbing. There's even a Web site, provided by New York University's Child Study Center, to help families get through the holidays unscathed.

It will be a Thanksgiving like no other. And yet, there is something very consistent about observing Thanksgiving in a time of adversity and difficulty and even danger. That is, after all, how it all began.

Currier and Ives-type portrayals have romanticized the event, which was actually pretty harrowing. Half of those hearty souls who left Plymouth and sailed to Holland and then picked up stakes again and sailed across the Atlantic to New England had died after one year in the new world. All but three families had dug graves in the rocky soil of New England to bury a husband, wife, child. They had brought plants and seeds with them on the Mayflower, along with provisions for the first winter. The barley they planted did very poorly. The peas failed altogether. Starvation was a real possibility. It was the corn, given to them by the natives, that saved them from starvation: two pounds per day per person for the critical second winter. Their Governor Bradford wrote in his journal, "The whole country, full of woods and thickets, represented a wild and savage hue, if they looked behind them there was the mighty ocean. What could sustain them but the spirit of God and his grace?"

They were, of course, people of the Bible, Puritans who were seeking a place to practice their faith in freedom without persecution. They knew about ancient Israel's harvest festival, how Israel, at the end of a successful harvest, thanked God for the bounty of creation—and also for delivering them from their captivity, giving them their freedom as a people.

That is the biblical root of Thanksgiving. The Pilgrim fathers and mothers read their own story in Israel's older, ancient story. God is thanked for the harvest, but also for something more, something not actually dependent on a successful harvest: namely God's presence and grace and love. The Pilgrims thanked God for enough corn to survive the winter. But they were also thanking God for the guiding presence they had experienced, the strong hand they had felt leading them, and the love that had sustained them through lonely, cold, dark nights, even as they were burying their loved ones.

Connecting the Pilgrim experience to the new situation in which we find ourselves this Thanksgiving, the *Time* writer says, "They—the Pilgrims—were willing to trade certainty for opportunity, to face a dangerous passage in order to arrive in a better place. This passage feels plenty dangerous now. But it has also given our children new heroes and our families new muscle and our beliefs new force and that is more than enough to be thankful for."

The Pilgrims understood that God is to be thanked and praised regardless of what is going on around us—in good times and not so good times. And that is the biblical witness as well. To a people about to be attacked, defeated, and exiled, the prophet Isaiah wrote:

Give thanks to the Lord,
call on his name. . . .
Sing praises to the Lord,
Shout aloud and sing for joy.

"Make a joyful noise to God, all the earth," the psalmist echoes.

It is such a persistent theme that C.S. Lewis once observed that what with the Bible's relentless harping about praising and glorifying and thanking God, God must be saying, "What I most want is to be told that I am great and good."

Lewis, of course, went deeper and in a little book on the psalms made the interesting point that the act of thanking God was actually for our benefit, not God's. The psalmist knew something important, Lewis said, namely that not to praise and thank God was to miss something essential, and furthermore, that there is a connection between expressions of gratitude and personal happiness. He wrote, "I noticed how the humblest and at the same time most balanced minds praised most; while the cranks, misfits, and malcontents praised least. Praise almost seems to be inner health made audible" (*Reflections on the Psalms*, pp. 78-81).

There is a story in the Bible about that. One time Jesus encountered a pathetic group of ten people—all of whom suffered from leprosy, the dreaded skin disease that so frightened people that the victims were isolated from family, community, synagogue. "Have mercy on us," they called out to Jesus. He healed them. But only one returned to thank him, threw himself at Jesus' feet, praising God.

Jesus asked, "Where are your friends? Were not ten made clean?" And to the grateful man at his feet he said, "Your faith has made you well." The Greek is actually stronger than that: "Your faith has saved you." So, ten are cured, but only one is well, whole, saved—and the reason, apparently, is his gratitude, his expression of thanksgiving.

Think about that: wholeness, wellness, happiness, salvation come as a result of thanksgiving and gratitude.

Think about that: faith is here defined not as believing certain doctrines to be true or living in purity and holiness. Faith, saving faith, is here described as taking delight in God's amazing goodness and love.

Think about that: unfaith is accepting God's gifts and taking them for granted, not expressing gratitude and taking delight.

The great theologian Karl Barth said that the basic human response to God is gratitude, not fear and trembling, not guilt and dread, but thanksgiving. "What else can we say to what God gives us but stammer praise," Barth said.

There is in the library of important Presbyterian literature a document called *The Shorter Catechism.* It is part of our *Book of Confessions.* Written in the seventeenth century, the